

**Mat Som, Ahmad Puad** (First Author)

School of Housing, Building & Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia

[ahmad.mat-som@strath.ac.uk](mailto:ahmad.mat-som@strath.ac.uk), [ahmadpuad\\_matsom@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ahmadpuad_matsom@yahoo.co.uk)

**Mohamed, Badaruddin**

School of Housing, Building & Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia

[bada@usm.my](mailto:bada@usm.my)

**Wong, Kong-Yew**

Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia

[kywong@econ.upm.edu.my](mailto:kywong@econ.upm.edu.my)

**Title: Tourism and Political Boundaries: Border Markets as Tourist Attractions**

### **Abstract**

Tourism appears to be an increasingly important industry in many border areas because many tourist destinations exist across boundaries. In many ways, the existence and functions of political boundaries influence the nature of the tourism industry itself and the spatial development of the tourist destinations (Timothy, 1995). Eriksson (1979) further suggests that the level of attractiveness of border areas depends on the natural, social and cultural environment near the border and the degree of freedom or difficulty in crossing it. By conducting in-depth interviews, this study attempts to investigate whether the growth of tourism industry on both sides of Malaysia and Thailand promotes local economy as well as cohesion between the two tourist areas and between communities with dissimilar cultures. The findings argue that the growth of tourism-related activities especially the border market has increased local participation in tourism. But, the degree of involvement tends to decrease over time due to high permeability between two different societies, which allows intrusion of foreign traders into local territories. In addition, local traders lack necessary resources to sustain the competitive business environment. Therefore, this research suggests that the different types of border areas as

they relate to tourism are closely related to the degree of difficulty for tourists in crossing the border and the degree of similarity in the cultures or societies located on both sides.

Keywords: border, tourism, cultures, societies.

## **Introduction**

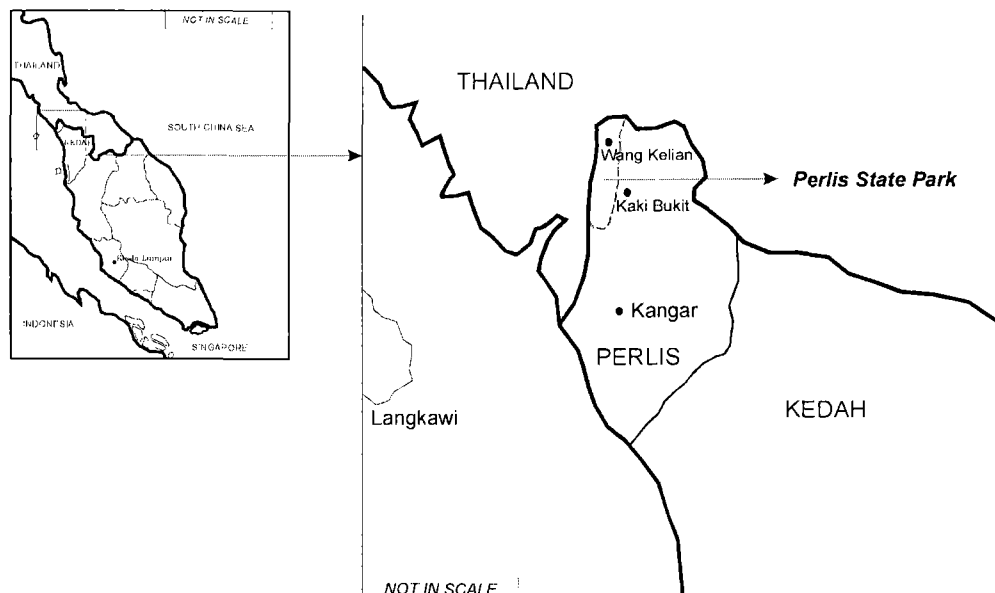
Political boundaries are invisible, and they mark the limit of territory in which a state can exercise its sovereign authority. Borders often limit contact between people and can function as lines of economic containment and military defense (Prescott, 1987). Reynolds and McNulty (1968) have suggested that when cultural or social groups do not extend across a political boundary, personal action spaces are likely to be skewed in directions along or away from it. In essence, a perceived distance is formed even though the actual distance is not great.

In addition to their roles as lines of separation, boundaries may also be viewed as lines of contact: places where similar or dissimilar cultures and economies converge. There are various examples in many parts of the world where political lines have been drawn through regions populated by culturally similar groups of people. This situation gives rise to problems of territoriality, and contact between similar groups often goes unaltered by the presence of a political divide (Timothy, 1995). Some open borders even allow a great deal of contact between dissimilar groups of people.

The function of international or political boundaries in many regions as barriers is decreasing rapidly. The position of borderlands as areas of contact and cooperation between different systems is gaining in strength (Hansen, 1983). There are increasingly more opportunities for cross-border cooperation in tourism through national and regional policies that stimulate contact and openness between neighbouring countries. One global manifestation of this change is the growth in numbers of international parks that lie across, or adjacent to, political boundaries. Thorsell and Harrison (1990) and Denisiuk *et al.* (1997) identified more than 70 borderland nature reserves and parks throughout the

world. One of these is Perlis State Park , which lies at the northwestern extremity of Peninsular Malaysia. The parks is the Peninsula's first trans-frontier protected area, together with Thailand's Thaleban National Park, which it joins at the border (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Perlis State Park, Malaysia



### Significant Features of Perlis State Park (PSP)

There are a number of significant features in the PSP:

- The Perlis section of Nakawan is the country's longest and continuous limestone range. The range consists Ordovician-Silurian limestone of 440 million year-old Setul Formation, which forms an extensive and deeply dissected range of hills (Amat and Osman, 2002). In addition, this range provides massive networks of underground water that would ensure continuous supply of quality water for the state.

- There is a limestone/granite interface at Gua Wang Burma that is possibly the northern-most cave in Peninsular Malaysia. The cave contains not only a passageway of 3.8 kilometres but also many interesting natural formations and mining artefacts, which are of interest to historians, naturalists and tourists (Amat and Osman, 2002).
- Gua Kelam or ‘Dark Cave’ has a natural passageway that used to provide the only access between the tin-mining town of Kaki Bukit and the village of Wang Kelian. The original cave was enlarged in 1935 by a resident Englishmen to serve as a route to transport tin ore (Tourism Malaysia, 2003), but mining activities in the caves ceased operations in the 1970s (Latiff *et al.*, 2001). A wooden walkway, stretching the entire length of the cave, has been constructed to allow visitors to view the magnificent stalagtite and stalagmite formations.
- Gunung Perlis (733 metres), the highest peak in Perlis and the northern-most end of Peninsular Malaysia, is also located in PSP.
- Wang Kelian Border Market allows visitors to cross the Thai-Malaysian border up to two kilometres on each side without the use of passports, provided that they remain within the market area.

### **Local Communities in the PSP**

The development of the PSP has direct impacts on two local communities, Kampung Wang Kelian and Kaki Bukit. Kampung Wang Kelian is a homogeneous Malay community with a population of approximately 200 people. Most of its people are farmers working in paddy fields, rubber smallholdings, orchards and vegetable farms besides rearing chickens and breeding fish. Kaki Bukit, with a population of 3,000, is the main town outside the PSP. The community is predominantly Chinese, and some of them are descendants of tin-miners who used to work in mining activities in caves that ceased

operations in the 1970s. They are currently involved in small businesses and agricultural practices.

Since the establishment of the PSP project in 2000, Perlis State Forestry Department (PSFD) has established a park headquarters comprising a visitor centre at Wang Kelian and an accommodation centre with chalets, dormitories and campsites at Wang Burma. As a matter of policy and practicality, general workers at the park headquarters are sourced from local communities to carry out maintenance work. Some of the general workers are also qualified nature guides, and they double up as guides for visitors to the natural attractions whenever required.

Meanwhile, the involvement of local communities in tourism-related business activities started even before the onset of PSP, through trading at Wang Kelian Border Market. Goods sold at the market include agricultural produce such as fruit and vegetables, cheap household items, clothes and handicraft (mostly from Thailand). The border market operates throughout the week, but the Sunday Market is the most popular and attracts disproportionately a large number of visitors to the area. Visitors vary from an estimate of 6,000 to an all time high of 40,000 (Amat, 2002). Records of 'free flow' border crossings showed an increase in the number of visitors from 396,983 in 1997 to 1,317,775 in 2002 (Pos Imigresen, 2002). The Village Head of Wang Kelian estimates that about 20 families from Kampung Wang Kelian and 80 families from Kaki Bukit benefit directly from activities at the Sunday Market.

The international border in Wang Kelian not only functions as a tourist attraction, but it also has represented an easy means to cross the boundary where similar cultures but different societies meet (Timothy, 1995). Many parts of the world are full of examples where political lines have been drawn through regions populated by culturally similar groups of people. Wang Kelian is no exception, and contact between similar groups often goes unaltered by the presence of a political divide. As tourists are permitted to cross the border easily, the growth of tourism on both sides is greatly promoted, and touristic areas eventually abut the boundary on both sides. As in many parts of the world,

cross-border shopping in Wang Kelian is a common activity for a number of perceived benefits, including lower prices and taxes and a wider or different selection of goods. However, border can also be a barrier even in the context of tourism, and the growth of cross-border shopping along the US-Canadian border was blamed for a drastic increase in the loss of Canadian jobs, retail bankruptcies and billion of dollars in lost government revenue (Timothy, 1995). According to Sukswan (2002), there is a perception among the local community in Wang Kelian that a leakage of revenue is occurring, whereby Thai traders are benefiting more from the Sunday market compared to local traders.

In general, incidence of poverty can still be observed in some of the villages surrounding PSP. Poverty gives rise to environmental problems such as faecal contamination of streams and the generally poor living conditions, in comparison to urban areas (Amat, 2002). While the state per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has improved from RM2,944 in 1985 (MPK, 1998) to RM10,802 in 2000 (GOM, 2001), the situation in Wang Kelian has not seen much change. Public facilities such as schools and clinics are still unavailable. The physical development in Wang Kelian is expected to improve with the development of a new tourist town to replace the existing Sunday market and the construction of a new housing development.

### **Research Methodology**

This research adopted the *emic*-study method by conducting in-depth interviews among officers from government agencies, managers and staff of park operations and local people – particularly the village heads and business people. In principle, informant samples for qualitative research tend to be relatively smaller and non-random, and the selection of interview informants is also driven by objectives other than generalisability (Kwortnik, 2003). The respondents are selected from a combination of criteria and snowball sampling to include people with experience of the phenomena being studied, on the assumption that ‘one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most’ (Merriam, 1988, p. 48).

## **Findings of Research**

The findings highlight that many local people in Wang Kelian and Kaki Bukit participate in business activities at the Border Sunday Market, which is situated in the PSP area. Its location in a natural surrounding, free movement of citizens across the border without any travel documentation and Siamese goods are the main attractions of the market. On the positive side, the market provides opportunities for local people in each country to be involved in business, and it promotes cross border tourism between Malaysia and Thailand. As mentioned by Timothy (1995), border functions as a tourist attraction, and cross-border shopping is a common leisure-based or economic-based activity in many countries.

However, the findings reveal that local involvement in business is declining due to economic downturn in the late 1990s and seasonality of visitors. The trading volume is high only during weekends, school holidays and festive seasons. Seasonal variation is claimed to be one of development issues in tourism in Malaysia. The findings further reveal that, over time, many local traders have been forced to close business due to strong competition from the relatively cheaper Siamese goods, and local traders do not have the survival skills to sustain the competition due to lack of capital and business knowledge.

This situation creates a vacuum for more entrepreneurial Thai traders to encroach the Malaysian territory, and they initially sublet and subsequently buy business premises from the local people. Some local business owners are too complacent in that they are comfortable with guaranteed incomes from fixed rentals rather than uncertain incomes from business. The situation in PSP can be characterised by the 'development' stage in Butler's Tourism Life Cycle (1980), although the tourism stage is relatively new. At this stage, local ownership and control is declining due to external ownership as well as a leakage of money to people outside the area. In fact, there is already a perception, as mentioned earlier, among local people that Thai traders benefit more from the Sunday Market than local traders. It is questionable whether the development of border towns across the northern parts of the country benefits local economies because the business

conflict between local and Thai traders is not only peculiar to Wang Kelian, but it also occurs in neighbouring Padang Besar and other border towns across the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia.

In a related development, business conflict between local and Thai traders is also aggravated by lack of enforcement from the beginning by the relevant authorities. According to the findings, there are several factors that hinder successful enforcement: i) Thai traders are persistent, ii) they know in advance when spot checks are to be conducted, iii) local people 'conspire' to act as middlemen during round-up operations, and iv) they marry local men and operate business using their spouse's permits. The complicated situation can be explained by the high degree of permeability between two different societies but with similar cultures – the Pattanis of Thailand and the Malays of Perlis. Inter-society marriages are observed, and many locals speak fluently Thai language, and vice versa. To these people, contact between them goes unaltered by the presence of a political divide (Timothy, 1995).

Elements of business opportunism are evident in PSP, as the findings reveal. On the positive side, a certain level of business opportunity is required to allow local people to participate in business. On the other hand, the level will reach a critical point where external sources will exploit local control. As is the case in PSP, outsiders (besides Thai traders) have started to monopolise other business activities in Wang Kelian, particularly the management of visitors' parking and rubbish disposal at the border market, souvenir shop operations at PSP's Visitor Centre and Gua Kelam's new business centre. From the government authority's perspective, this is fair because community is defined in a wider geographical context, and communities that extend beyond PSP boundaries are interpreted as local by the state authorities. In addition, they also claim that local communities in Wang Kelian and Kaki Bukit do not have the required expertise and capital to operate such business endeavours. However, this is clearly a sign of political disempowerment where the implementing agency treats local communities as passive beneficiaries and fails to involve them in decision-making (Scheyvens, 1999). The presence of a small group of local opportunists, who exploit opportunities for personal



interest, have worsened the above situation. As discussed by Cullingworth (1985), these opportunists, while remain a small section of the society, are the articulate and concerned individuals who have roles in skewing decisions or opportunities towards their own interest.

In a related development, the findings also disclose that many local people are skeptical that the new tourist town development will bring greater benefits to them. This supports Weaver's (1998) argument that the influx of new development ideas, foreign money and new power structures may leave the local people in a state of concern. The local traders are also worried that the new development will discourage local participation and jeopardise local business because they cannot afford to buy the premises. This is true because the high degree of foreign investment may result in land and property price inflation, beyond the means of the average low-income residents. The state government has also proposed to build a duty free complex in Wang Kelian, but many respondents perceive such development is inconsistent with the overall development concept in PSP because it promotes foreign goods and 'internationalisation' of ecotourism.

## **Conclusion**

In general, the above discussions indicate that local people in PSP welcome tourism's economic impacts from the development of Wang Kelian border market. Page and Dowling (2002) argue that viable ecotourism should provide material well-being to the local people, and the market should provide maximum and long-term economic benefit to the host community, although its activity is not purely ecotourism. However, over time, the local traders are marginalised because they are not empowered with the required skills to improve their circumstances and they are not self-sufficient in the change process. It is also a sign of economic disempowerment and a typical example of manipulative participation, where outside entrepreneurs exercise their power in the community. If this business conflict is allowed to increase, Murphy (1985) and Haywood (1988) argue that resident attitudes towards tourism will become hostile and may result in damage to the social and cultural systems of the local community. In addition, it will also

decrease the quality of tourism experience at PSP. Eventually, local people will become passive recipients and do not share in the economic benefits due to high degree of external investment.

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